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Vietnam Union Seeking Freedom

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Mr. Riesel

WASHINGTON, Some U.S. peace demonstrators have burned the American flag and some have dragged it through gutters while holding high the Viet Cong Communist banners.

But in Viet Nam there are those — of the working class, if you please — who hold high the American flag and proudly parade with it through Saigon streets.

Symbol of the flag burners frequently is the charred draft card. There amongst the flag bearers, it is the water buffalo — long horned sign of the Confederation of Vietnamese Workers (CVT) — 300,000 strong.

They carried the U.S. standard alongside the colors of their own nation on May 1st, their own Labor Day. They held it not as stooges, but as a symbol of their hopes. They did not burn or spurn it. Instead — and it is time this was reported in our own land — the CVT parade signs said:

"Welcome international cooperation of labor movements in free and democratic countries for labor promotion and social progress in Viet Nam."

America's flag was carried by members of the CVT's Farm Workers Union — whose peasants daily defy the knives, the plastic bombs, the Viet Cong's whispered threats that "you're dead men if you work for the Americans."

There were no masks on the daring faces of the free farm workers. They paraded openly and rather proudly.

Leader of the CVT is the 53-year-old Tran Quoc Buu who, though a Buddhist, is a vice president of the Confederation of Christian Trade Unions, headquartered in Brussels.

Though predominately Buddhist, the CVT has retained its international affiliation. But it works not for the West nor for the East.

Buu fights for his people and the freedom of his land. Recently when the rebellious Buddhist Federation leaders came to him — with not very subtle pressures — and urged him to help them paralyze South Viet Nam with a general strike, he refused. Without him, the Buddhists failed.

This was not the first time he helped save what there is of a non-Communist government in Saigon.

Not too long ago, during the days of Maxwell Taylor there,

demanded he throw the CVT forces into street demonstrations with them.

He refused.

He spured them because their demonstrations were political.

Then came the Catholic groups. Again he turned away the pressures and for the same reason.

Then he announced that he would take his followers into the streets, not as a political upheaval but as a sign of economic protest.

When Gen. Taylor heard this he phoned Buu. The general, then ambassador, remonstrated. He told Buu that going into the streets at such a moment might topple the regime.

But Buu held his lines. Not to go into the streets when his grievances were legitimate would make him out to be a puppet of Saigon and Washington. He turned Gen. Taylor down, too.

The labor men marched — as labor men do throughout the free world.

And it should be marked by those who cry out against the alleged totality of Saigon's government that there have been more strikes in South Viet Nam in the past few years than in all the lands behind the iron and bamboo curtains.

There is freedom.

Reports now on my desk from recently returned visitors — and from Ted Gleason, president of the International Longshoremen's Assn., who now is back on the docks of Saigon — disclose that president Buu and his people have struck the waterfront, textile mills and other plants. They have threatened to strike utilities.

But this comes of doing what comes naturally in lands where the right to strike is the privilege of free men.

Buu's walkouts were negotiated and settled. His are not political stoppages. If they were, he could cripple the work Ted Gleason now is directing in the unclogging of the ports. Mr. Buu could halt railroads, darken streets, cut off power and cripple agricultural work.

But, knowing Buu as some of us do, he would not do that to the land and the people he loves, and for whom he has fought the French and for whom he has suffered in rotting cells and through many hours